

In the name of God. Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

A very happy and blessed start of Advent to you all. And, by the way, the end of the world is coming and we are all going to die.

If those opening lines felt rather like an experience of tonal whiplash, then I have sympathy. For the readings that we hear during the season of Advent can seem puzzling. When I first started attending church regularly as an adult, I had looked forward to my first Advent (always a favourite time of year for me as a child) and rather expected a month long telling of familiar stories anticipating Christmas: the star in the east guiding the magi, the host of angels stirring shepherds to see the newborn babe, a harried innkeeper perhaps, and touching reflections on what Mary must have pondered in her heart.

I thought it fairly obvious what the Christian message of Advent was and how this might be set apart from the culture of the wider holiday season: this was a time for learning how to be patient, how to wait. It was about lighting a candle each Sunday as we journeyed with the patriarchs and prophets who prepared the way for the events of Bethlehem. We were to lean into an anticipation of the birth of Christ on Christmas day, the Word made flesh, the light in the darkness, the hope amidst our fear. I thought that this represented quite enough of a contrast with the bombardment of messages we receive from advertisers in December, all urging us to plan busily, spend extravagantly and celebrate early.

But then I heard these readings. Fierce, frantic and final. They are not focused on Christmas at all. They don't speak of the first coming of Christ, of God born among us. Instead, they tell of the greater story of which Christmas is a part. Of Christ sent back to us. Of Judgement and finality. Above all they remind us - our story has an end.

We all need to hear the end of this story, however uncomfortable it might be to confront.

Spending four weeks just in anticipation of Christmas Day cannot be enough. However hard we try to take ourselves out of our context each year and imagine ourselves into the time before Jesus was born, we can never fully manage it. We are creatures of our own age. An Advent which merely throws us back to the past, which is a steady, persistent drumbeat of day-after-day until we arrive at the 25th of December, will always be imperfect. We are looking for a baby to be born while we know that baby has already been born, and is still being born in us - the Emmanuel who came and is coming and is among us right now. So Advent must be a season of unpredictable time, unsteady time. It must be about looking to our present and future as well. That means, looking at things we might rather not.

And when we do, we're reminded that looking to the end of time is the very essence of the good news we have to share as Christians. That judgement at the end of time means the pouring out of God's mercy, it

means the passing away of all injustice, it means vindication for the oppressed - a final answer to the prophet Jeremiah's guttural call for justice in his time. Final judgement means letting go of all the guilt and anxiety we carry with us. It means no longer using judgement as a weapon against ourselves or others, but receiving it as a word of grace from God. This is the real hope contained within our Advent waiting.

And it is the real hope contained within our gospel reading this morning.

In the passage from Luke, Jesus is in fully apocalyptic mood. And there are certainly images that might seem terrifying here: the Son of Man coming on a cloud of glory while the earth is distressed and the heavens are shaking. But to be clear, the word apocalypse simply means an 'unveiling', or 'making clear a truth that was hidden'. We're not encountering in this text a preview of how the end of the world will literally come. Jesus' words put into vivid language the call on the lives of people following Christ - to look at the fainting and foreboding all around, the signs of chaos and uncertainty. Christ addresses our instinct to look away, calling us instead to lift our heads and see hope.

This passage speaks to our presence in the world. For it is only by looking up and raising our heads that we can see beyond the worries and anxieties of our time - a world in danger of destroying itself through climate change, a pandemic that has created an uncertain future for millions of people, and of ever-rising inequality.

We are called to be those who see the whole picture, who see God's perspective, who can see that redemption is drawing near. It is only when we pay attention to the fig tree, noticing it is bare, that we can recognise when the leaves start to sprout. It is only by watching and waiting through long winters - listening for the voices that have not been heard, noticing the assumptions of those in positions of power, seeing the suffering of those who experience poverty, fixing on those people facing the very real storms of the English channel - only by having truly seen the lifeless tree, having paid attention day by day, week by week, that we will notice the change when the buds start to appear. Only then can we begin to see the hope of transformation that God can bring. For the days are surely coming, says the Lord.

This is no mere escapism from the world around us. Because to see the world as it truly is, is to see the world as it truly can be, by seeing that a different reality is possible when we know that the kingdom of God is drawing near. Our task is to pay attention, but by paying attention to penetrate the signs of chaos and despair, to see within them and beyond them the signs of hope, the buds of new life beginning to form. Advent is a time to practice this discipline of attention, noticing not only the pain and suffering reaching into forgotten corners of the world but also fulfilling our Christian vocation, watching for the signs of God's new creation. To hold the uncertainties and anxieties of our times in the light of God's promise of transformation, justice, peace; the flourishing of the righteous branch.

As we heard at the start of this service, at St Mark's this month, there will be opportunities to spend time in prayer, study and conversation with others, growing in precisely this Advent discipline together. For all of this is not only for ourselves, but ultimately it is for the sake of others. We are called to look for the signs of God's kingdom in order to proclaim what we see to others. To enable all God's people to see themselves anew, to see God's redemption and freedom in their own lives.

And we enter into our Advent wait knowing that this call to hope in the end of days is not a popular or easy task. The Advent message of challenge and hope is easily drowned by waves of seasonal good cheer and the temptations of retail therapy. We can hardly avoid those things. We can even enjoy them. But Christian hope is bigger and better than we can begin to conceive. And in Advent, the season of hope, we can come close to catching a glimpse.

A blessed Advent to you all, and...Come, Lord Jesus, Come.